

A RUSSIAN DIARY

**A Journalist's Final Account of Life,
Corruption, and Death
in Putin's Russia**

Anna Politkovskaya



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ALSO BY

ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

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FOREWORD

SCOTT SIMON

ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA COULD HAVE LEFT RUSSIA—REMEMBER THAT as you read these journals. She was born in 1958 in New York, where her Ukrainian parents were Soviet diplomats at the United Nations. The U.S. embassy in Moscow considered her a citizen. She was entitled to an American passport.

With all of the resourcefulness that Anna Politkovskaya had relied on to survive in Chechnya and Ingushetia, she might have pulled a scarf over her short, soft gray hair, doffed the simple oval glasses by which she was so easily identified, left her apartment building by a back door, met a friend to guide her, and gone to the U.S. embassy. Or visited her sister, Elena Kudimova, in London (Russian officials were glad to see her go, knowing that next to nothing she said or wrote outside of Russia would ever be heard or read there), and just stayed. She could have flown to Berlin or New York to accept one more award for heroism. She could have gone to a conference on the Caucasus in Paris or Vienna, told stirring stories of her indisputable courage to astounded students at Columbia, Stanford, or Iowa State, signed up with a think tank in Washington or Cambridge, and never have to go back to Moscow.

Anna Politkovskaya could have lived in Manhattan, Palo Alto, or Santa Monica, with a car service waiting downstairs to whisk her away to expound on Russia's corruptions and treacheries from the safe confines of a television studio or college campus. She would have risked leaving her mother, who was battling cancer, and her twenty-six-year-old daughter and first grandchild. But she would be alive—surely what they would have preferred.

Family and friends had urged her to leave. Russian soldiers, police, oligarchs, criminal gangs, and the highest-ranking Russian politicians had explicitly threatened her life. When she grew violently ill after sipping a cup of tea on a flight into Beslan to negotiate during the school hostage crisis in 2004, she saw it was an attempt to silence her there and then. Alexander Litvinenko, the former KGB man who became a critic of Vladimir Putin, told her to leave Russia.

But Anna told David Hearst of Britain's *Guardian* newspaper in 2002, “The more I think about it, the more I would be betraying these people if I walked away. The only thing to do is to take this to the bitter end, so that no one can say that when things became difficult, I ran away.”

Those words would sound sanctimonious from almost anyone else.

AS THE DAUGHTER OF SOVIET DIPLOMATS, Anna grew up with books, magazines, and access to news that was banned for ordinary citizens; in fact, her parents, impressed by the free flow of ideas in the West, smuggled books in for her. When she studied journalism at Moscow State University, she risked writing her dissertation about the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, who had been banned by Stalin and eventually hanged herself.

She went to work for *Izvestiya*, the official house organ of the Supreme Soviet Central Committee. *Pravda*, the other best-known official daily (but in no sense a competitor) was the official voice of the Communist Party. *Pravda* means “truth,” *Izvestiya* means “news,” and the joke among Russians was, “There is no news in *Pravda* and no truth in *Izvestiya*.”

Within a few years Anna was able to meet the criteria for a job at the in-house magazine of Aeroflot, the state

airline of the USSR. The journalism was probably trickier than what Americans associate with airline monthlies (creating a favorable impression of the grimy and treacherous Aeroflot fleet in the early 1980s would have tested Dostoevsky's imagination). But she also qualified for free plane tickets, which she used to explore the breadth of her own vast, dazzling country. She fell in love with the majestic immensity of Russia's variety and soul. She was appalled by the depth of its poverty and cruelty.

When the era of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika began to bloom, Anna saw opportunities to do the kind of journalism she had known in the West. She became part of the founding group of *Novaya Gazeta* (New Newspaper). It was that newspaper that first sent her to Chechnya, where she would return thirty-nine times. At the heart of these journals is the anger and revulsion Anna Politkovskaya felt over what she witnessed there, over and over, and what that brutality disclosed about the system that ruled her country.

Americans may see the Russian war in Chechnya as a prolonged conflict stretching on for more than a decade, like the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan (or America's in Vietnam). But for Russians, there are two distinct wars. The first was declared by Boris Yeltsin, after local leaders split the Chechen-Ingush republic in two as the Soviet Union spun apart in 1991. Ingushetia joined the Russian Federation. Chechnya refused. Russian forces rolled in to Chechnya in 1994 (Czechoslovakia 1968 style, one is tempted to say) when Russia said that instability and civil war threatened peace in the region.

But by 1996, the ill-equipped Russian Army, which rained down expensive explosives on Chechens, but could not feed or shoe its soldiers, had to withdraw. Russian public opinion, appalled by the uselessness, cost, and visible brutality of the war, called on Yeltsin to sue for peace. Many in his government openly blamed the press for informing and inflaming the public. Anna Politkovskaya was prominent among those reporters who sent back vivid and infuriating stories of Russia's scorched-earth campaign of kidnappings, rapes, massacres, and the bombing of innocents. If such coverage caused the public to shut down the war in Chechnya, Anna believed it was an example of what a free press and an informed public in a democratic society should have the power to do.

Anna Politkovskaya strongly believed that Vladimir Putin and Russian security services had allowed the self-proclaimed Chechen terrorist Shamil Basaev to stage raids in Dagestan in 1999. This permitted Vladimir Putin to cite chaos and instability as a reason to send Russian forces back into Chechnya. I am less certain of that, and will leave Anna to make her own argument in these journals. But Putin had manifestly drawn lessons from the first failed Russian campaign in Chechnya: keep out reporters, and have no mercy. The killings, rapes, indiscriminate shellings, and torture of Chechens became more intense—and went almost unreported.

In October 2002, heavily armed terrorists professing allegiance to Chechen separatists (Shamil Basaev claimed credit for the plan) seized the Dubrovka theater in Moscow during a performance of *Nord-Ost*, a Russian musical. They took 912 people hostage. The terrorists said that all of the captured theatergoers would be killed unless the Russian government withdrew its forces from Chechnya.

Anna Politkovskaya, whose reporting from Chechnya had made her name known among the terrorists, was called in to try to negotiate some kind of agreement that would save the lives of the hostages. No agreement was reached. The Russian government quickly concluded, if it had ever thought otherwise, that none was possible. After just two and a half days, Russian special forces stormed the building. But first they laid down a cloud of what is still an unidentified gas.

Thirty-three terrorists were killed—some might have escaped—but so were at least 130 of the hostages. No Russian special forces died.

Important questions persist: How did any of the hostages die when a gas was laid down to render their captors unconscious? Why was there no medical assistance on-site for the hostages? Why were terrorists shot if they were stunned and inert? Was there something that government forces didn't want anyone to have the chance to say?

Anna Politkovskaya came away convinced that the terrorists (and she called them that; no stylebook euphemisms for Anna, like *militants* or *activists*) never would have killed the hostages, and that the Russian government never would have permitted a peaceful solution: it wanted to shed blood. I am less sure of the former than I am of the latter. She was there, I was not, and I honor her experience and judgment. I just am not convinced that the kind of people who use guns to capture innocents in the first act wouldn't use them to kill before the curtain fell. From my own experience I can imagine gasping, coughing terrorists shooting hostages as they grasp that Russian special forces are preparing to storm in.

But indisputably, the Russian government used the siege to squelch the last gasps of a free and independent press. It closed one television station during the siege and censored radio and television coverage. Then the Putin government used the siege to persuade the lower house of the Duma to pass broad, blunt new restrictions on what the press can report and how. And the Duma pointedly refused to form a commission to investigate the government's handling of the theater siege. Questions about how and why the gas was used, and the effect inside, will never be fully explored.

(Anna saw Basaev as the almost predictable creation of the savagery of Russia's assault on Chechnya. In fact, a Russian air attack on Basaev's hometown of Dyshne-Vedeno in 1995 had killed eleven members of his family, including his wife and children. But I cringe at seeing this as any grounds for the siege of the school in Beslan, for which Basaev also claimed credit with no apparent regret. More than 344 civilians were slaughtered, including 186 school children.)

During this period, Anna was angry at America and Western Europe, which continued to support Vladimir Putin. She did not expect or want the West to sally forth. She had already had enough Western “help,” thank you, and said, “Those in Russia who hope for help from the West need finally to recognize that winning back our democratic freedoms is up to us.”

But she was aghast when the West turned a blind eye toward Putin's crushing of Chechnya, his stranglehold on power, and his suppression of opposition, just as it had once overlooked Stalin's starvations, hangings, gu-lags, and massacres. The sad truth is that a lot of Western democracies like dealing with dictators. Tyrants can be tidy and reliable business partners.

She also became frustrated with opponents of Putin's rule almost as much as she was with Putin's own regime, and the criminal gangs and oligarchs who ran wild with his indulgence. She thought that the tyrants and thieves had no conscience, while the reformers were elitists with little conviction, or courage for confrontation.

“Our society isn't a society anymore,” she wrote. “It is a collection of windowless, isolated concrete cells... The authorities do everything they can to make the cells even more impermeable, sowing dissent, inciting some against others, dividing and ruling. And the people fall for it.

That is the real problem. That is why revolution in Russia, when it comes, is always so extreme. The barrier between the cells collapses only when the negative emotions within them are ungovernable.”

And to be sure, in some of her lowest moments, some of them revealed in this book, Anna Politkovskaya wondered if Russians really wanted a free press—or a free country. And indeed a 2005 poll conducted by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center showed that 82 percent of the public wanted censorship. That figure might have represented the great number of Russians who were aghast at the coarse sex and violence that has become common on television in particular. But it certainly gives the government popular support for laws that stifle the press and political opposition.

At about that time, Anna wrote approvingly of a group of people who organized a series of hunger strikes:

There is much you can no longer say, but you can still go on hunger strike to show that you have been silenced. Sounding off at protest meetings has become virtually useless, mere preaching to the converted;

those who share your views already know the situation, so why keep telling them about it? Standing in picket lines is pointless, unless it is to salve your conscience. At least you'll be able to tell your granddaughter that you did more than vent your spleen in your own kitchen. Even writing books that don't get published in Russia because they are off-message doesn't have much impact. They are read only by people living abroad.

By the way: at this writing, Anna Politkovskaya's *A Russian Diary* isn't being published in Russia.

ON THE DAY THAT ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA was shot to death, October 7, 2006, in the elevator of her apartment block on Lesnaya Street, the editor of *Novaya Gazeta* says that she was about to file a long story on torture as it is routinely conducted by Chechen security forces supported by Russia. That story will almost certainly never be read by anyone, inside or outside Russia. Even the substance of it will probably never be known. Russian police seized her notes, her computer hard drive, and photographs of two people she would reportedly accuse of torture.

It is dangerous to be a real journalist in Russia today. A conscientious Russian journalist, unlike reporters in North America or Western Europe, doesn't have to travel into war zones to risk his or her life. Danger comes to his or her doorstep, car, or apartment block.

The Glasnost Defense Foundation, led by Alexey Simonov of the Moscow Helsinki Group, reports that during 2005 alone, six Russian journalists were murdered, sixty-three were assaulted, forty-seven were arrested, and forty-two were prosecuted. The editorial offices of twelve publications or broadcasters were attacked. Twenty-three editorial offices were closed. Ten were evicted from their premises. Twenty-eight newspapers or magazines were confiscated outright. Thirty-eight times, the government simply refused to let material be printed or distributed.

Thirteen Russian journalists have been killed—in Russia, not Chechnya, Iraq, or Afghanistan—since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000.

Any American journalist who reads Anna Politkovskaya's journals should find it difficult to accept with a straight face the awards we give one another that laud us for being bold or courageous.

I've probably had a fairly typical career for a reporter who has covered conflicts. I've had to duck sniper fire, been shaken by bombs, and once spent two anxious days locked in a room by teenage Palestinian kids who said they didn't trust Jews and wanted the tapes of my interviews. I've been called a Communist by fascists and a CIA agent by Communists, and I've been not too cleverly or subtly threatened. But as a member of the Corleone or Soprano family once said, "This is the business we've chosen."

Yet after reading *A Russian Diary*, I hope I always shrink from the arrogance to compare any challenges I face to those of a conscientious Russian journalist. If the president of the United States, Bill Gates, the CEO of Exxon, or the head of the Chicago mob doesn't like one of my stories, he has the power to crush ... a pen in his hand and *write a really strong letter*.

The likes of Seymour Hersh, Nina Totenberg, and Brian Ross would be in prison in today's Russia—or driving cabs for their own protection. When American reporters challenge the government or corporate line on a story and spotlight abuse, deceit, greed, crimes, and conflicts of interest, they can wind up on *All Things Considered*, *The Daily Show*, and the bestseller list. They bring home trophies, get good tables in restaurants, and are given fellowships.

If Anna Politkovskaya had the courage to attempt so much with so little, how can those of us who are reporters in the unsurpassed freedom of America demand anything less of ourselves?

A Russian Diary is not a personal memoir in the way Americans have come to expect. Readers will discover little here of Anna Politkovskaya's personal life. There is little visible, even between the lines, of the strain of Anna's career on her family, or the "special challenge" of being a woman in a war zone (she would have been hard to book on *Oprah Winfrey*). She does not tell self-serving anecdotes about her colleagues. She rarely shares the gritty details

of how she was able to dig up, cajole, or uncover a story. There are no entries of the kind that say, “Had coffee with a pleasant young woman named Jolie at the Satsita refugee camp in Ingushetia, and she said ...” She rarely speaks of being scared—except for her country.

Of course Anna had a personal life. She had two children and was about to become a grandmother. Her sister, Elena Kudimova, told me in a letter, “Anna never thought about being remembered, because as a normal human being less than fifty years old, she was looking forward to living, especially inspired by the fact that she would have been a grandmother soon.”

She was considered a caring friend, and friends have told the story that once she returned home to Moscow from Grozny, where she had reported on a Russian rocket attack that killed scores of people, including babies, new mothers, and grandmothers, in a market and a maternity hospital, only to find her husband packing up to move out of their apartment. “I can't take this anymore,” he was supposed to have said, which might sound more sympathetic the second or third time you hear it.

I don't think what Westerners might call Anna Politkovskaya's *work*— which wasn't ambition for money, notoriety, or advancement, but the struggle for the survival of her country—was more important to her than her family. Anna heard a ticking clock winding down on a box of dynamite in a darkened room. She could see no good life for her family or anyone's family unless the country that she loved could pull back from its fall into despotism and cruelty. As a patriot and a parent, Anna Politkovskaya gave her life to try to prevent that.

“People often tell me I am a pessimist; that I do not believe in the strength of the Russian people; that I am obsessive in my opposition to Putin and see nothing beyond that,” she wrote. “I see everything, and that is the whole problem. I see both what is good and what is bad... By 2016 many of my generation may no longer be around, but our children will be alive, as will our grandchildren. Do we really not care what kind of life they will have, or even whether they will have a life at all?”

March 1, 2007

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Some of Anna's diary entries include comments she added at a later date, and these are separated by a centered asterisk. Comments in parentheses are her own. Her murder just as the translation was being completed meant that final editing had to go ahead without her help. Information added by the translator is enclosed in square brackets. An asterisk in the text indicates an entry in the glossary.





People often tell me I am a pessimist; that I do not believe in the strength of the Russian people; that I am obsessive in my opposition to Putin and see nothing beyond that.

I see everything, and that is the whole problem. I see both what is good and what is bad. I see that people want to change for the better but are incapable of making that happen—and that in order to conceal this truth they concentrate on the positive and pretend the negative isn't there.

To my way of thinking, a mushroom growing under a large leaf can't just hope to sit it out. Almost certainly someone is going to spot it, cut it out and devour it. If you want to live like a mushroom, I cannot reconcile you with the demographic forecast from the state statistical committee for the period 2003 to 2016. By 2016 many of my generation will be dead. Many of those who will be alive, as will our grandchildren, will be poor. They will have no money, no education, or even whether they will have any.

THE DEATH OF RUSSIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Many seem not to understand that if the same political and economic policies, the Russian population will fall by 6.4 million people. That is the optimistic forecast: that by 2016 Russia will have a population of 138.8 million people.

The pessimistic forecast is not so easy to come by, but you can dig it out if you are sufficient. **December 2003–March 2004** It is not to do something about changing the situation in Russia right now. The pessimistic forecast is that we will be down to 128.7 million people. Millions of the poor, unable to afford privatized medical services, will die. Young people will continue to be killed in droves in the army. In wars and also outside of wars, all those who are "not on our side" will be shot or sent to rot and die in prisons.

That is if everything remains as it is now. If, in a fundamental manner, we do not tackle poverty. If the disgraceful neglect of health care provision and our environment persists. If we do not embark on a determined national campaign against alcoholism and drug addiction. If the war in the North Caucasus is not ended. If a humiliating social welfare system is not changed that allows a person barely to survive with no prospect of

HOW DID PUTIN GET REELECTED?

ACCORDING TO THE CENSUS OF OCTOBER 2002, THERE ARE 145.2 million people living in Russia, making it the seventh most populous country in the world. Just under 116 million people, 79 percent of the population, describe themselves as ethnically Russian. We have an electorate of 109 million voters.

December 7, 2003

The day of the parliamentary elections to the Duma,* the day Putin* began his campaign for reelection as president. In the morning he manifested himself to the peoples of Russia at a polling station. He was cheerful, elated even, and a little nervous. This was unusual: as a rule he is sullen. With a broad smile, he informed those assembled that his beloved Labrador, Connie, had had puppies during the night. “Vladimir Vladimirovich was so very worried,” Madame Putina intoned from behind her husband. “We are in a hurry to get home,” she added, anxious to return to the bitch whose impeccable political timing had presented this gift to the United Russia Party*.

That same morning in Yessentuki, a small resort in the North Caucasus, the first thirteen victims of a terrorist attack on a local train were being buried. It had been the morning train known as the student train, and young people were on their way to college.

When, after voting, Putin went over to the journalists, it seemed he would surely express his condolences to the families of the dead. Perhaps even apologize for the fact that the government had once again failed to protect its citizens. Instead he told them how pleased he was about his Labrador's new puppies.

My friends phoned me. “He's really put his foot in it this time. Russian people are never going to vote for United Russia now.”

Around midnight, however, when the results started coming in, initially from the Far East, then from Siberia, the Urals, and so on westward, many people were in a state of shock. As my pro-democracy friends and acquaintances were again calling each other and saying, “It can't be true. We voted for Yavlinsky* even though...” Some had voted for Khaka-mada.*

By morning there was no more incredulity. Russia, rejecting the lies and arrogance of the democrats, had mutely surrendered herself to Putin. A majority had voted for the phantom United Russia Party, whose sole political program was to support Putin. United Russia had rallied Russia's bureaucrats to its banner—all the former Soviet Communist Party and Young Communist League functionaries now employed by myriad government agencies—and they had jointly allocated huge sums of money to promote its electoral deceptions.

Reports we received from the regions show how this was done. Outside one of the polling stations in Saratov, a lady was dispensing free vodka at a table with a banner reading “Vote for Tretiak,” the United Russia candidate. Tretiak won. The Duma deputies from the entire province were swept away by United Russia candidates, except for a few who switched to the

party shortly before the elections. The Saratov election campaign was marked by violence with candidates not approved of by United Russia being beaten up by “unidentified assailants” and choosing to pull out of the race. One who continued to campaign against prominent United Russia candidate twice had plastic bags containing body parts thrown through his window: somebody's ears and a human heart. The province's electoral commission had a hotline to take reports of irregularities during the campaign and the voting, but 8 percent of the calls were simply attempts to blackmail the local utility companies. People threatened not to vote unless their leaking pipes were mended or their radiators repaired. This worked very well. The inhabitants of the Zavod and Lenin districts had their heating and main water supply restored. A number of villages in the Atkar District finally had the electricity and telephones reconnected after several years of waiting. The people were seduced. More than 60 percent of the electorate in the city voted, and in the province the turnout was 53 percent. More than enough for the elections to be valid.

One of the democrats' observers at a polling station in Arkadak noticed people voting twice, once in the booth and a second time by filling out a ballot slip under the direction of the chairman of the local electoral commission. She ran to phone the hotline, but was pulled away from the telephone by her hair.

Vyacheslav Volodin, one of the main United Russia functionaries who was standing in Balakov, won by a landslide, with 82.9 percent of the vote; an unprecedented victory for a politician devoid of charisma who is renowned only for his incoherent television speeches in support of Putin. He had announced no specific policies to promote the interests of local people. Overall in Saratov Province, United Russia gained 48.2 percent of the vote without feeling the need to publish or defend a manifesto. The Communists got 15.7 percent, the Liberal Democrats* (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's* party) 8.9 percent, the nationalistic Rodina (Motherland) Party* 5.7 percent. The only embarrassment was that more than 10 percent of the votes cast were for “None of the above.” One-tenth of the voters had come to the polling station, drunk the vodka, and told the lot of them to go to hell.

According to the National Electoral Commission's figures, over 10 percent more votes were cast in Chechnya,* a territory totally under military control, than there are registered voters.

St. Petersburg held on to its reputation as Russia's most progressive and democratical city. Even there, though, United Russia gained 31 percent of the vote, Rodina about 14 percent. The democratic Union of Right Forces* and Yabloko* (Apple) Party got only 1 percent each, the Communists 8.5, and the Liberal Democrats 8 percent. Irina Khakamada, Alexander Golov, Igor Artemiev, and Grigorii Tomchin, democrats and liberals well known throughout Russia, went down to ignominious defeat.

Why? The state authorities are rubbing their hands with glee, tuttutting and saying that “the democrats have only themselves to blame” for having lost their link with the people. The authorities suppose that, on the contrary, they now have the people on their side.

Here are some excerpts from essays written by St. Petersburg students on the topics of “How my family views the elections” and “Will the election of a new Duma help the president in his work?”:

“My family has given up voting. They don't believe in elections anymore. The elections will not help the president. All the politicians promise to make life better, but unfortunately ... I would like more truthfulness.”

“The elections are rubbish. It doesn't matter who gets elected to the Duma because nothing will change, because we don't elect people who are going to improve things in the country, but people who thieve. These elections will help no one—neither the president nor ordinary mortals.”

“Our government is just ridiculous. I wish people weren't so crazy about money, that there was at least some sign of moral principle in our government, and that they would cheat the people as little as possible. The government is the servant of the people. We elect it, not the other way round. To tell the truth, I don't know why we have been asked to write this essay. It has only interrupted our lessons. The government isn't going to read this anyway.”

“How my family views the elections is they aren't interested in them. All the laws the Duma adopted were senseless and did nothing useful for the people. If all this is not for the people, who is it for?”

“Will the elections help? It is an interesting question. We will have to wait and see. Most likely they won't help in the slightest. I am not a politician, I don't have the education you need for that, but the main thing is that we need to fight corruption. For as long as we have gangsters in the state institutions of our country, life will not get better. Do you know what is going on now in the army? It is just endless bullying. If in the past people used to say that the army made boys into men, now it makes them into cripples. My father says he refuses to let his son go into an army like that. ‘For my son to be a cripple after the army or even worse—to be dead in a ditch somewhere in Chechnya, fighting for who knows what, so that somebody can gain power over this republic?’ For as long as the present government is in power I can see no way out of the present situation. I do not thank it for my unhappy childhood.”

These read like the thoughts of old people, not the future citizens of New Russia. Here the real cost of political cynicism—rejection by the younger generation.

December 8

By morning it is finally clear that, while the left wing has more or less survived, the liberal and democratic “right wing” has been routed. The Yabloko Party and Grigorii Yavlinskii himself have not made it into the Duma, neither has the Union of Right Forces with Boris Nemtsov and Irina Khakamada, nor any of the independent candidates. There is now almost nobody in the Russian Parliament capable of lobbying for democratic ideals and providing constructive, intelligent opposition to the Kremlin. The triumph of the United Russia Party is not the worst of it, however.

By the end of the day, with more or less all the votes counted, it is evident that, for the first time since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has particularly favored the extreme nationalists, who promised the voters they would hang all the “enemies of Russia.”

This is dreadful, of course, but perhaps only to be expected in a country where 40 percent of the population live below even our dire official poverty line. It was clear that the democrats had no interest in establishing contact with this section of the population. They preferred to concentrate on addressing themselves to the rich and to members of the emerging middle class, defending private property and the interests of the new property owners. The poor are not property owners, so the democrats ignored them. The nationalists did not.

Not surprisingly, this segment of the electorate duly turned away from the democrats while the new property owners jumped ship from Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces

United Russia just as soon as they noticed that Yavlinsky, Nemtsov, and Khakamada seemed to be losing their clout with the Kremlin. The rich decamped to where there was concentration of the officials without whom Russian business, which is mostly corrupt and supports and feeds official corruption, cannot thrive.

Just before these elections, the senior officials of United Russia were saying openly, “We have so much money! Business has donated so much we don't know what to do with it all. They weren't boasting. These were bribes that meant, “Don't forget us after the elections, will you?” In a corrupt country, business is even more unscrupulous than in countries where corruption has at least been reduced to a tolerable level and where it is not regarded as socially acceptable.

What further need had they of Yavlinsky or the Union of Right Forces? For our new rich, freedom has nothing to do with political parties. Freedom is the freedom to go on great vacations. The richer they are, the more often they can fly away, and not to Antalya in Turkey, but to Tahiti or Acapulco. For the majority of them, freedom equals access to luxury. They find it more convenient now to lobby for their interests through the pro-Kremlin parties and movements, most of which are primitively corrupt. For those parties every problem has its price; you pay the money and you get the legislation you need, or the question put by a Duma deputy to the procurator general's office. People have even started talking about “deputies' denunciations.” Nowadays these are a cost-effective means of putting your competitors out of business.

Corruption also explains the growth of the chauvinistic “Liberal Democratic Party,” led by Zhirinovsky. This is a populist “opposition,” which is not really an opposition at all because, despite their propensity for hysterical outbursts on all sorts of issues, the Liberal Democrats always support the Kremlin line. They receive substantial donations from our completely cynical and apolitical medium-sized businesses by lobbying for private interests in the Kremlin and adjacent territories such as the procurator general's office, the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Bureau [FSB*], the Ministry of Justice, and the courts. They use the technique of deputies' denunciations.

That is how Zhirinovsky got into the Duma both last time and this. Now he has an enviable thirty-eight seats.

The Rodina Party is another chauvinistic organization, led by Dmitry Rogozin* and created by the Kremlin's spin doctors specifically for this election. The aim was to draw moderate nationalist voters away from the more extreme National Bolsheviks. Rodina has done well too, with thirty-seven seats.

*

Ideologically, the new Duma was oriented toward Russian traditionalism rather than toward the West. All the pro-Putin candidates had pushed this line relentlessly. United Russia encouraged the view that the Russian people had been humiliated by the West, with open anti-Western and anticapitalist propaganda. In the pre-electoral brainwashing there was no mention of “hard work,” “competition,” or “initiative” unless in a pejorative context. On the other hand, there was a great deal of talk of “indigenous Russian traditions.”

The electorate was offered a variety of patriotism to suit every taste. Rodina offered rather heroic patriotism; United Russia, moderate patriotism; and the Liberal Democrat Party outright chauvinism. All the pro-Putin candidates made a great show of praying and crossing themselves whenever they spotted a television camera, kissing the cross and the hands of Orthodox priests.

It was laughable, but the people blithely fell for it. The pro-Putin parties now had an absolute majority in the Duma. United Russia, the party created by the Kremlin, took 211 seats. Another 65 “independents” were to all intents and purposes also pro-Kremlin. The result was the advent of a one-and-a-half-party system, a large party of government plus several small “barnacle” parties of similar persuasion.

The democrats talked so much about the importance of establishing a genuine multiparty system in Russia. It was something in which Yeltsin* took a personal interest, but now that was lost. The new configuration in the Duma excluded the possibility of significant disagreement.

Shortly after the elections, Putin went so far as to inform us that Parliament was a place not for debate, but for legislative tidying up. He was pleased that the new Duma would not be given to debating.

The Communists won forty-one seats as a party, plus a further twelve through individual Communists standing independently. It pains me to say that today it is the Communist deputies who are the most moderate and sensible voices in the Fourth Duma. They were overthrown only twelve years ago, yet by late 2003 they had been transfigured into the great white hope of Russia's democrats.

In the months that followed, the arithmetic in the Duma changed somewhat, with deputies migrating from one party to another. Absolutely everything the presidential administration wanted passed got approved by a majority vote. Although in December 2003 United Russia had not obtained a majority large enough to change the Constitution (for which 301 votes are required), this was not to prove a problem. In practical terms, the Kremlin “engineered” a constitutional majority.

I choose the word advisedly. The elections were carefully designed and executed. They were conducted with numerous violations of electoral law and, to that extent, they were rigged. There was no possibility of legally challenging any aspect of them because the bureaucrats had already taken control of the judiciary. There was not a single ruling against the results by any legal institution, from the Supreme Court down, no matter how indisputable the evidence. This judicial sanctioning of the Big Lie was justified as being “in order to avoid destabilizing the situation in the country.”

The state's administrative resources swung into action in these elections in just the same way as in the Soviet period. This was also true in no small measure of the elections in 1995 and 2000 in order to get Yeltsin elected even though he was ill and decrepit. This time, however, there was no holding back the presidential administration. Officialdom merged with the United Russia Party as enthusiastically as it used to with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the CPSU). Putin revived the Soviet system as neither Gorbachev* nor Yeltsin had done. His unique achievement was the establishment of United Russia, to the cheers of officials who were only too glad to become members of the new CPSU. They had plain-

been missing Big Brother, who always did their thinking for them.

The Russian electorate, however, was also missing Big Brother, having heard no words of comfort from the democrats. There were no protests. United Russia's election slogans were stolen from the Communists and were all about rich bloodsuckers stealing our nation's wealth and leaving us in rags. The slogans proved so popular precisely because it was not the Communists proclaiming them.

It must also be said that in 2003 a majority of our citizens heartily supported the imprisonment, through the efforts of members of United Russia, of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky* head of the Yukos oil company. Accordingly, although manipulating the state's administrative resources for political ends is no doubt an abuse, the politicians had public support. It was just a matter of the administration's leaving nothing to chance.

December 8

Early in the morning, political analysts assembled on the *Free Speech* program to discuss the results as they came in. They were jittery. Igor Bunin talked of a crisis of Russian liberalism about how the Yukos affair had suddenly aroused a wave of antioligarchic feeling in the middle of the campaign. They talked about the hatred that had accumulated in the hearts of many people, “especially decent people who could not bring themselves to support Zhirinovskiy,” and the fact that the eclectic United Russia Party had managed to unite everybody, from the most liberal to the most reactionary. He predicted that the president would now stand in for the liberals in the ruling elite.

On the same program, Vyacheslav Nikonov, the grandson of Molotov, suggested that young people had not turned out to vote and this was the main reason for the democrats' defeat. “Ivan the Terrible and Stalin are more to the taste of the Russian people.”

The evening's television continued. The program was funereal, with an added sense of impending stormy weather. Those in the studio seemed more inclined to take shelter than to fight. Georgii Satarov, a former adviser to President Yeltsin, insisted that the outcome had been decided by the “nostalgia vote” of those who pined for the USSR. The democrats came in for a lot of flak. The writer Vasilii Aksyonov complained that the liberals had failed to exploit the unsavoriness of the Yukos affair. He was quite right. The democrats failed to take a stand one way or the other over the issue of Khodorkovsky's treatment.

*

Free Speech was shortly to be taken off the air by its parent company NTV, to which Putin commented, “Who needs a talk show for political losers?” He was referring, no doubt, to Yavlinsky, Nemtsov, and the other defeated liberals and democrats.

Vyacheslav Nikonov was to transform himself a few months later into a raging apologist for Putin. There were to be many such conversions among political analysts.

So, where would we go from here? Our freedoms were bestowed upon us from above, and

the democrats kept running to the Kremlin for guarantees that they would not be revoked, effect accepting the state's right to regulate liberalism. They kept compromising and now have nowhere left to run to.

On November 25, thirteen days before the elections, a number of us journalists had talked for five hours or so to Grigorii Yavlinsky of the Yabloko Party. He seemed very calm and confident, to the point of arrogance, that he would make it into the Duma. We suspected some bargain had been struck with the presidential administration: provision of administrative resources to support Yabloko in return for "burying" a number of issues during the campaign. For me and many others who used to vote for Yabloko, this made our flesh creep.

Yavlinsky had no time for the idea of an alliance between Yabloko and the democratic Union of Right Forces Party.

"I consider that the Union of Right Forces played an enormous part in unleashing the Chechen war. It was the only party that could in any way be described as democratic and in favor of civil society, yet they chose to say that the Russian Army was being reborn in Chechnya, and that anybody who thought otherwise was a traitor who was stabbing the Russian troops in the back."

"So who else could Yabloko now unite with against the war in Chechnya?"

"Now? I don't know. If the Union of Right Forces were to admit that they had been wrong we could discuss the possibility of an alliance with them. But while Nemtsov is pretending to be a dove of peace and Chubais* is talking about the liberal ideal, you'll have to forgive me. I'm not prepared to discuss that possibility. Whom else we could unite with I don't know."

"But it was not the Union of Right Forces who began the second Chechen war."

"No, it was Putin, but they supported him as a candidate for the presidency and incidentally, legitimized him as a war leader in the eyes of the intelligentsia and the entire middle class."

"You are at daggers drawn with the Union of Right Forces. You don't want an alliance with them, but you have embarked on a number of compromises with the president and his administration in order to obtain some degree of administrative support for your campaign. As I understand it, and there have been many rumors to this effect, the war in Chechnya is precisely the compromise in question. You have agreed not to make too much noise about the Chechen issue, and in return you have been guaranteed the necessary percentage of votes to get you into the Duma."

"Don't rely on rumors. That is a completely wrong approach. There are rumors about your own newspaper too. No other paper is allowed to write about Chechnya, but you are not shut down for doing so. The rumor is that they give you that leeway so they can go to Strasbourg and wave your newspaper about to show what a free press we have. See what is being written about Chechnya in *Novaya Gazeta*! I don't suppose for a moment that is really the way things are..."

"All the same, please give a straight answer."

"I never struck any such deal or agreed to any such compromise. It is out of the question."

“But you did have talks with the administration?”

“No, never. They talked about giving us money, back in September 1999.”

“Where was that money coming from?”

“We didn't get down to that kind of detail, because I said it was unacceptable. I said I was not against Putin—I had only just set eyes on the man—but to say I would endorse everything he was going to do six months in advance was impossible. I was told, ‘Then in the case we cannot reach agreement with you, either.’ Later, after the elections, when the leaders of the parties were invited to the Kremlin and seated in accordance with their percentage of the vote, one of the most highly placed officials in the land said, ‘And you could have been sitting here...’ I replied, ‘Well, that's just the way it is.’ This time they didn't even offer.”

“When did you last speak to Putin?”

“On July 11, about the Khodorkovsky affair and the searches at Yukos.”

“At your request?”

“Yes. They assembled the entire State Council and the leaders of the political parties at the Kremlin to discuss economic programs, etc. The meeting ended at half past ten at night and I told Putin I needed to talk to him urgently. At half past eleven I met him at his home. We discussed various problems, but the main one was Khodorkovsky.”

“Did you realize that Khodorkovsky would be imprisoned?”

“There was no knowing that in advance, but it was clear that the affair was being taken very seriously. I realized something bad would happen to Khodorkovsky when the *Financial Times* in London published an enormous article with photographs of Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Fridman,* and Roman Abramovich, under a very large headline, which they don't usually do. The story was to the effect that those oligarchs were transferring their wealth to the West and preparing to sell everything here. There were quotes from Fridman saying it was impossible to create modern businesses in Russia, that although they themselves were really pretty good managers, there was no way, in the midst of all the corruption, you could establish proper companies in our country.”

“Have you already reconciled yourself to the fact that Putin will win a second term?”

“Even if I don't reconcile myself to that, he will get it.”

“How do you realistically assess your chances?”

“How should I know? Our own research tells us we have 8 or 9 percent, but we are talking about elections where votes get added here, added there, and they call it ‘managed democracy’ People just give up.”

“I have the impression that you are giving up too. After all, people in Georgia* rejected the results of rigged elections and used extraparliamentary methods to alter the situation. Perhaps you should do the same? Perhaps we all should? Are you prepared to resort to extraparliamentary methods?”

“No, I'm not going down that path, because I know that in Russia it would end with the spilling of blood, and not mine, either.”

“What about the Communists? Do you think they might take to the streets?”

“Everybody is gradually being fed the information that they are going to get 12 to 13 percent. It has already become the conventional wisdom. I don't rule that out, because politically Putin has very successfully stolen their clothes. United Russia is hardly going to take to the streets because it's been awarded 35 percent and not 38, and there are no other mass parties. They simply don't exist. Forming a political opposition in Russia became a practical impossibility after 1996. First, we lack an independent judiciary. An opposition has to be able to appeal to an independent legal system. Second, we lack independent national mass media. I mean television, of course, and primarily Channel One and Channel Two. Third, there are no independent sources of finance for anything substantial. In the absence of these three fundamentals it is impossible to create a viable political opposition in Russia.

“There is no democracy now in Russia, because democracy without an opposition is impossible. All the prerequisites for a political opposition were destroyed when Yeltsin beat the Communists in 1996, and to a large extent we allowed them to be destroyed. There isn't even the theoretical possibility of a 100,000-strong demonstration anywhere in Russia today.

“It is a peculiarity of the present regime that it doesn't just brutishly crush opposition, as was done in the era of totalitarianism. Then the system simply destroyed democratic institutions. Now all manner of civil and public institutions are being adapted by the state authorities to their own purposes. If anyone tries to resist, they are simply replaced. If they don't want to be replaced, well then, they'd better look out. Ninety-five percent of all problems are resolved using these techniques of adaptation or substitution. If we don't like the Union of Journalists, we will create Mediasoyuz. If we don't like NTV with this owner, we will reinvent NTV with a different owner.

“If they began taking an unwelcome interest in your newspaper, I know perfectly well what would happen. They would start buying up your people, they would create an internal rebellion. It wouldn't happen quickly, you have a good team, but gradually, using money and other methods, inviting people to come closer to power, turning the screws, cozying up, everything would start to fall apart. That's how they dealt with NTV. Gleb Pavlovsky stated openly that they had murdered public politics. It was no more than the truth. The authorities also deliberately create pairings, so that everybody has someone to shadow. Rodina can take on the Communists; the Union of Right Forces can take on Yabloko; the People's Party can take on United Russia.”

“But if they are up to all this trickery, what are they afraid of?”

“Change. The state authorities act in their corporate interests. They don't want to lose power. That would put them in a very dangerous situation, and they know it.”

Yavlinsky was not to make it into the Duma.

Were we seeing a crisis of Russian parliamentary democracy in the Putin era? No, we were witnessing its death. In the first place, as Lilia Shevtsova, our best political analyst accurately put it, the legislative and executive branches of government had merged, and that had meant the rebirth of the Soviet system. As a result, the Duma was purely decorative, a forum for rubber-stamping Putin's decisions.

In the second place—and this is why this was the end and not merely a crisis—the Russian people gave its consent. Nobody stood up. There were no demonstrations, mass protests, ac-

of civil disobedience. The electorate took it lying down and agreed to live, not only without Yavlinsky, but without democracy. It agreed to be treated like an idiot. According to an official opinion poll, 12 percent of Russians thought United Russia representatives gave the best account of themselves in the pre-election television debates. This despite the fact that the representatives of United Russia flatly refused to take part in any television debates. They had nothing to say other than that their actions spoke for them. As Aksyonov remarked, "The bulk of the electorate said, 'Let's just leave things the way they are.'"

In other words, let's go back to the USSR—slightly retouched, slicked up, modernized, but the good old Soviet Union, now with bureaucratic capitalism where the state official is the main oligarch, vastly richer than any property owner or capitalist.

The corollary was that, if we were going back to the USSR, then Putin was definitely going to win in March 2004. It was a foregone conclusion. The presidential administration concurred, and lost all sense of shame. In the months that followed, right up until March 14, 2004, when Putin was indeed elected, the checks and balances within the state vanished, and the only restraint was the president's conscience. Alas, the nature of the man and the nature of his former profession meant that was not enough.

December 9

At 10:53 a.m. today a suicide bomber blew herself up outside the Nationale Hotel in Moscow across the square from the Duma and 145 meters [160 yards] from the Kremlin. "Where is this Duma?" she asked a passerby, before exploding. For a long time the head of a Chinese tourist who had been next to her lay on the asphalt without its body. People were screaming and crying for help, but although there is no shortage of police in that area, they didn't approach the site of the explosion for twenty minutes, evidently fearing another explosion. Half an hour after the incident the ambulances arrived and the police closed the street.

December 10

There is little comment on the terrorist incident, or on why such acts take place.

Russia's upper chamber, the Soviet of the Federation, has announced the date of Putin's reelection. Putin immediately goes into top gear, using all sorts of anniversaries and special days to present himself to the country and the world as Russia's leading expert on whatever is being celebrated. On Cattle Breeders' Day he is our most illustrious cattle breeder; on Builders' Day he is our foremost brickie. It is bizarre, of course, but Stalin played the same game.

Today, as luck would have it, is International Human Rights Day, so Putin summoned our foremost champions of human rights (as selected by him) to the Kremlin for a meeting of the Presidential Commission on Human Rights. It began at 6:00 p.m. and was chaired by El

Pam-filova,* a democrat from the Yeltsin era.

The pediatrician Dr. Leonid Roshal spoke for one minute about how much he loves the president; Lyudmila Alexeyeva of the Moscow Helsinki Group spoke for five minutes about improper use of state resources during elections (which Putin didn't deny); Ida Kuklina of the League of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers spoke for three minutes about the exploitation of soldiers as slave labor and other army horrors; Valerii Abramkin of the Center for Reform of the Criminal Justice System spoke for five minutes about the things that go on in places of detention (the president seemed to appreciate his speech more than the other speeches); Elena Pamfilova spoke at great length about the dismal relations between human rights campaigners and the law enforcement agencies; Svetlana Gannushkina of the Memorial Human Rights Center had three minutes to explain the implications of the new law on citizenship; Tamara Mor-shchakova, adviser to the Constitutional Court, had seven minutes to present proposals for making the state authorities publicly accountable; Alexey Simonov spoke for three minutes on freedom of speech and the predicament of journalists; and Sergei Borisov and Alexander Auzan of the Consumers' Association talked of the need to protect small businesses.

Ranged against them were the head and deputy head of the presidential administration; the procurator general of Russia, Vladimir Ustinov; the minister of the interior, Boris Gryzlov; the minister of justice; the minister for the press; the chairmen of the constitutional, supreme and business arbitration courts. Nikolai Patrushev, director of the FSB, was also present at the beginning, but left shortly afterward.

All the campaigners in turn set about Procurator General Ustinov. In between their attacks Putin would also give him a dressing-down and accuse him of unjustifiable rulings. Tamara Morshchakova kept up a legal commentary on what was being said, urging for example that a social worker should be present during the questioning and court appearances of minors. This is standard practice in many countries, but to the Kremlin it sounded radically new. Ustinov parried by claiming this would be contrary to Russian law, and Morshchakova brought him up short by pointing out that the laws he was referring to simply did not exist. This meant either that the procurator general did not know the law, which is clearly unthinkable, or that he was deliberately misleading his hearers. With Putin present this was hardly thinkable either, which led back to the first possibility, which is incompatible with holding the office of procurator general.

"It is only when they have direct personal experience of something that you can go anywhere," Svetlana Gannushkina told me. "While the president was talking on the telephone to Bush, I went over to Viktor Ivanov, the deputy head of the presidential administration and chairman of a working group on migration legislation. I unexpectedly found that we had equally negative feelings about residential registration. Ivanov's wife had recently spent five hours standing in line to get temporary registration of friends who had come to stay with them in Moscow. It had made her furious."

This prompted Ivanov to recognize the folly of reviving residential registration, and he vowed to fight it. An FSB general, he offered to set up a joint working group with Gannushkina to reform it. "Give me a call," he said. "Draw up a list of members for the group. We'll work on it together."

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